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Provocations in Cultural Geography

Anthropocenic Culturecide: an epitaph

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Anthropocenic Culturecide: an epitaph

Introduction: Anthropocene culture and the loss of 'nature'

Writing as a scholar who is firmly embedded in critical anti-racist and postcolonial practice in the world of cultural geography, my academic focus has been on the excluded, occluded, forgotten and indeed 'othered' within the disciplinary repertoire. This provocation, with its focus on the Anthropocene, is similarly motivated. Anthropocene, for some scholars, is *naturecide*, the public death of a modern account of 'nature' (Lorimer, 2012), incorporating homogenisation (Ellis et al. 2012) and the end of knowable terrain. However, I argue that the conceptual realm of the Anthropocene erodes, erases and denudes the histories and futures for *both* biological and human cultures in all their conjoined landscapes and ecologies. This epoch has been borne out of both the annihilation not just of an 'environment' or 'nature', sometimes evoked in a pastoral register, but also of cultural life (often in the realm of racialized, marginalised or indeed figured as 'other'). My argument is that the loss of cultures should be witnessed alongside the loss of nature. Many of these cultural morphologies (Sauer, 1925) represent niches of human and non-human co-existence and co-constitution. The provocation here is for cultural geography, in its critical academic role (Slaughter, 2012; Palsson et. al, 2013), to be mindful of cultural diversity and biological diversity as being simultaneously at risk of erasure (Pretty et. al 2009; Hulme, 2008).

Within the sensibilities of the Anthropocene there is much focus on 'loss', or on the competing anxieties (Robbins and Moore, 2012) about landscapes of sterility and infertility, poisoned landscapes, or of islands of plastic debris (Howden and Marks, 2008) and plastic

geologies (<http://www.Sciencemag.org>). In the political and conceptual call for the Anthropocene that witnesses the loss of nature and its agency, I argue that we must acknowledge the plurality of 'loss' in order to witness the scale and patterns of the eradication of majority world cultures both within and outside the 'west'. This eradication is termed *culturecide*, and it is at the heart of the geopolitical differentials between accelerations of loss and the drive towards the preservation of some cultural heritages, narratives and practices over others in the Anthropocene (see Dalby, 2013a). We need to move beyond the perceived dualisms (Head and Muir, 2007) and recognise a way forward towards the sustainability of all cultures experiencing uneven and unequalled patterns of cultural annihilation happening in our time. However 'culture' and 'nature' are co-constituted, coproduced and dynamically co-dependent; losses too are interconnected, but aren't evenly felt in the world that we dwell in. It is thus imperative that we raise empathy and compassion and call together scholars that recognise that within the conceptual logics of the anthropocene, the phenomenon of *culturecide* is the flip-side of the very same coin as the domain of *naturecide*.

Despite knowing that both biodiversity and cultural diversity intersect, and are needed to increase resilience and enable societies to adapt and cope with change (Pretty et al, 2008), they are often evoked separately in the imagining of the Anthropocene (Procter, 2013). Therein lies the continuation of an account of 'nature' privileged above the losses of diversity of human cultural life. Accounts of loss privilege the defilement of our romanticised 'pristine' ecosystems, and biodiverse palimpsests (Schimel *et al* 2013). Embedded in this affective logic is the loss of possibilities: possibilities of diverse human futures or indeed any 'human-nature' equilibrium (Karlsson, 2013). If a future

human response to the Anthropocene is to 'shoulder the mantle of planetary stewardship' (Procter, 2013) then that stewardship also is about engaging with and preventing the loss of cultural as well as biological diversity. Overall, the current dominant political forces and their conjoined military technologies inherently challenge every organism in the biosphere (albeit unevenly) and the possibilities for dwelling in every eco-cultural niche; they do so by accelerating the loss of 'culture' in human terms. Historically, when thinking about *majority* cultures, black bodies are left in a contradictory dichotomous position of being both part of nature and/or outside the realms of human concerns for nature. Agyeman (1978) has termed this cultural practice environmental racism. It is time we made space for empathy for the uneven losses that face the majority world, the geographies of the 'other' (Said, 1978), and those often at the edges of our lens.

Culturecide: Genealogies, Ontologies

The anthropogenic transformation, however, is not about absolute loss. The terrestrial biosphere is causing unprecedented global changes, but Ellis *et al.* (2012) remind us that while the sensibilities of loss have us grieving for thinning native species and biotic homogenisation, "half of all regional landscapes are enriched substantially by exotic plant species when compared with undisturbed native richness. And while an additional 39% of the biosphere seems without a substantial net change in species richness, this was only because exotic gains offset native losses" (Ellis *et al.*, 2012; Jones J.P.G, 2011). While changes in the biosphere may be quantifiable, losses in terms of the diversity of human cultures, niches and the homogenising effect of the very same transformation of the biosphere are as complex to gauge and indeed pin down beyond anthropological accounts (Head, 2000). At present in some countries First Nations people are experiencing acute eradication, these are

also immeasurable (Bargh, 2007). Cultural erasures are often unrecognised losses endured even before their self-determination has been fully realised in postcolonial times (<http://www.afn.ca/en>). There are the epistemic violences resulting from the Imperialist lens (Code, 2006) which still try to position aboriginal cultures and First Nations people as collective and singular. Yet, there is no singular common cultural reality for all First Nations people. One example is Brazil, where development projects are erasing regions that were once recognized by the Brazilian government in the 1950s as the nation's first indigenous territory (Marzec, 2014). The proposed Belo Monte Dam will destroy the complex ecosystem and biodiversity of the Xingu basin, as the basin is home to some twenty-five thousand indigenous peoples from eighteen ethnic groups. Marzec (2014) outlines indigenous demonstrations that targeted the (BMD) construction in Brazil in 2012, which is ironically hailed as an example of "green" development. As such, the destruction of indigenous lands and damage to the Amazon ecosystem are valued as secondary to the provision of energy. This dam is one small part of an immense project to construct sixty dams in the Amazon basin to serve 27 million users. Brazil characterizes the dam as a "clean energy" solution (Llanos, 2012).

Culturecide: The *War on Terror* and Cultural Genocide

Genocide is defined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (U.N., 1948); alongside this, many commentators have focussed on the proliferation of systemic, cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is the 'systematic eradication of a group's cultural existence . . . and fundamental aspects of a group's unique cultural existence are attacked with the aim of destroying the group' (Nersessian, 2005). The 'War on Terror' in its present and recent formation has compounded occurrences of cultural

genocide. The eradication of cultures in Iraq is a further example of the ways in which culturecide operates to end cultures simultaneously to the expansionist politics of political control and domination in the Middle East. In Iraq the eradication of minority cultures is exemplified by the killing of hundreds of Yazidis (Mamouri, 2014), whereas according to the BBC, the *Mandaeans* (BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>) are solely based in Iraq but have fled as a result of persecution since military actions in the Persian Gulf began in 1993. Further, Iraq's cultural heritage has been destroyed as part of the military occupation or indeed, as some suggest, in a manner enabled by the military occupation itself (Aronovitch, 2003). The pillaging of artefacts (100, 000) (see Salamy, 2005) that mapped its rich human heritage has effectively robbed Iraq of the evidence of its place in history (Cruickshank, 2003), as well as of the possibilities for its future citizenry's pride and self-determination. Among the recent destruction of architecture and ancient sites, is the *Iman Dur Shrine*, which UNESCO describe as "one of the emblematic representations of Islamic architecture of its time." (see Iman Foundation, 2014) These singularly violent eradications add to the devastation of ancient sites of world importance (see Cruickshank, 2003).

In this post-occupation era the cultural control of Iraq is ripped from its people, who feel under attack. Many poets, artists and cultured individuals in Iraq share the view that "Baghdad being the capital of Arab culture is a big lie. Culture is currently in the hands of people who ignore the meaning of the word and the significance of a cultured person's role" (Almonitor, 2003). Initiated by the Brussels Tribunal, research has clarified the immense crimes against humanity for the US/UK occupation has to take the responsibility for "genocide by other means" and "historical annihilation" (Baxter, et. al. 2010). Culturecide at this level does not stop at the borders of Iraq and to its links to military occupation. Other

sites are being erased as a result of sectarian violence as we have seen in Lebanon in 2014 and Timbuktu in Mali in 2012. The productive generosity that is necessary for (universal) reconciliation (Clark, 2010) is absent here too.

In terms of our everyday lives there are aspects of violence that diminish our societal space to be and to dwell. The constraints may be about the wrong bodies in the wrong place or about spaces that are culturally vetted, homogenised or indeed 'corporatised'. Part of the fabric of what we are losing, as Stewart argues in *Ordinary Affects*(2007), are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation. The circulations are hitting cul-de-sacs and the palette of affects within the possibilities of life is also diminished. As Stewart argues, '(T)hings have started to float. It's as if solid ground has given way. . . as if the possibilities of a life have themselves begun to float' (Stewart 2007, p61). These possibilities include a newly sensitised world where new ethical sensibilities emerge (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009). As we witness these losses we need to be mindful of our responsibilities and care towards the ontologies we employ. We also need to continue to be mindful of our grammars, vocabularies, genealogies, and versions of historical space-time, through which we articulate redress. Overall this evocation of culturecide for cultural geography is a call to witness the effects of a geopolitical environment powered by a refusal to swerve a dependency on fossil fuels, that subdues and eradicates cultures in favour of domination of geological stratum, thus endangering diversity for all biolife and biopolitics.

Culturecide

In this moment of the call for the new ecological era recognising the death or 'killing' of nature, this provocation seeks to remember the destruction of niches of humanity, creativity, poetics and aesthetics that are the collateral damage of the contemporary

ecologies of war (and responses to them), the imperatives of capitalism and the global economy, alongside the misplaced cornerstones of the moral economies of 'living a successful life'. What I argue here is that erasure of systems of organic life and geological violence is occurring at the very same time as the geopolitical phenomenon of *culturecide*. The point is that the forces that promulgate twenty-first century naturecide are the very same as those that power culturecide: two executioners hacking away at the same victim. This provocation is about embedding a critique of the propelling of inhumane loss as part of understanding the sensibilities that underpin the politics of this 'catchword in ascendancy' (Castree, 2014). The current focus is to situate the human as perpetrator of these losses, but here, it is the forces of capitalism, and the dependency on non-renewables that produces victims and perpetrators beyond the monolithic account of 'human' in contemporary representations. Castree (2014) for example uses the term 'a thoroughly humanised earth' where *human* is a singularly homogeneous species, but what we have at play is a differentiated landscape of power subsuming differentiated sets of philosophies and values which are not *always* anthropocentric in their nature or culture.

Culturecide is a site of focus then, on power politics, of the simultaneous occurrence in the Anthropocene of the domination of cultural forces that remove potentialities of synchronicity between human-nature-centred futures, and in the first wave eradicate human societies at the nexus of access and control of fossil based non-renewables.

Culturecide is about pausing for thought and placing, *in memoriam*, the eradication of cultures also at the heart of the Anthropocene. Not only are these cultures or niches of culture deadened, but they represent possibilities of alternative ways of living, philosophies

and politics. They are part of the problematic we face, a world where dominant powers cannot tolerate (bio)diverse ethics, sensibilities, societies and cultures.

The possibilities for democratic politics

Shot through the current era of accelerated erasures, the time-space of 'other' biopolitics is also under erasure. A new biopolitics is necessary and imminent (Dalby, 2013b). There are stratified systems of politics and power which create an uneven process of erasure, time and terrain. The power, politics and rhythms of thinking through and enacting bio-life are not even; power, non-human, human relations are fused. Grosz (2008) underlines this co-dependency: '(G)eopower, the relations between the earth and its life forms, runs underneath and through power relations'. Yusoff (in Johnson *et al.*, 2014) takes this further and argues that 'this form of geocapitalisation (that is also a historically constituted mineralisation of the human through fossil fuels) is erased from our understanding of biopolitical life' (p15). Yusoff is not only arguing for the recognition of non-human agency, but for an awareness and recognition of the politics of *bio/life* (human and non-human) as already being shaped and shot through politics and capitalism with the power/agency of non-human biota. Yusoff (2013a, 2013b) counters Swyngedouw's lament at the 'non-political politics' of climate change. The nature of change is posited as a geopolitical cultural politics where *homo* and *geo* are co-produced. However, just as the Anthropocene conceptually enables us to think biopower as it produces landscape, it also enables us to see human landscapes 'in another sense, they are an entirely novel and quite gargantuan trace fossil system, one that extends kilometres deep into older rock in the form of millions of boreholes and mineshafts' thus, human history must be seen 'within the deep-time context of the rock record' (Zalasiewicz, 2013). Ultimately the politics of writing history (de Certeau,

1988) is undermined through an account of thinking *geopower* (Yusoff *et al.* 2012) which seeks to 'avoid a post-political future and remain open to politics of liberation and justice (in relation to class, race, sexuality, gender etc.) without reducing them to matters of secondary or tertiary concern?' (Johnson *et al.*, 2014). It is the politics of the Anthropocene that is theoretically exciting, that in this new era we can put the geopolitical impetus 'to domination and control that animates so much politics' (Johnson *et al.*, 2014:11) in its place; as an anathema to taking the long-term future of humanity seriously. By attending to the politics of the Anthropocene we can architecturally revolutionise our reference points for change and reflection.

This epitaph is about reflecting on the cultural and geopolitical losses that are the excess to current accounts of the domination and control of fossil fuels. This is a reverse look at the death of not just an *asocial nature*, but hopefully also the death of an anti-human geopolitical project that dominates 'other' humans, societies and potentialities of culture, philosophy and creativity, largely in the global 'south'.

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